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REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND RELATED FIELDS

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report covers the period between the Economic and Social Council's substantive sessions of 1995 and 1996. The report consists of three sections. Section I highlights some important aspects of the work of the regional commissions, with special emphasis on follow-up activities to recent global conferences. Section II deals with trends in regional economic and social cooperation, including trade issues, and the work of the commissions in that regard. Section III, covering the reports of the executive secretaries of the regional commissions on their meetings held during the period under review, focuses on the ongoing reform and restructuring exercises of the commissions. Resolutions and decisions adopted by the regional commissions at their respective sessions during the period under review are contained in the addendum.

The issues in the three sections are intended to be mutually complementary. For instance, since most current social development issues of major concern are covered in section I, the coverage of social issues in section II is somewhat abbreviated.

The summaries of the economic surveys of the five regions have been made available to the Council. The annual reports of the regional commissions contain further background information on the matters dealt with in the present report and its addendum. They are issued as supplements to the Official Records of the Economic and Social Council.

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I. TRENDS AND ACTIVITIES, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES TO RECENT GLOBAL CONFERENCES

1. Several positive developments in the international economy during the period under review had favourable bearing on the situation in most of the regions of the world, and they augur well for the strengthening of regional economic and social cooperation. However, diversities among regions were notable, with many countries, especially in Africa, lagging in achieving growth and putting further strains on policies for social equity and poverty alleviation.

A. Work of the regional commissions

1. Economic Commission for Europe

2. The major feature of ECE work during the reporting period was the preparation of strategic directions for its future work in order to adapt its activities to new realities in the region. Particular attention was paid to relations and cooperation with the ECE principal partner institutions outside the United Nations system - Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Commission, the Council of Europe, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Cooperation with the subregional groupings within the region was further enhanced. ECE was called to identify effective means of enhancing economic cooperation with Mediterranean countries in all areas of the ECE programme of work, in cooperation with the United Nations system, OSCE and the European Union.

3. Preparation and publication of the Economic Survey for Europe and the Economic Bulletin for Europe remain an important activity of ECE. Both publications continued to give particular emphasis to current economic development and policy issues and to economic trends in the region.

4. The "Environment for Europe" process received decisive support at the Third Ministerial Conference (Sofia, October 1995), when Ministers from 49 ECE member States and the European Commission endorsed the Environmental Programme for Europe. The Conference endorsed the ECE Guidelines on Access to Environmental Information and Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making and envisaged the development of a regional legally binding instrument (convention) on the subject. The Ministers called for strengthening and implementation of and compliance with the ECE environmental conventions. Negotiations on three new protocols for the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution were initiated in 1995, and three ECE environmental conventions in a transboundary context on water management, environmental impact assessment and industrial accidents were strengthened, pending their entry into force.

5. Considerable progress was made in the preparations for the Regional Conference on Transport and Environment, to be held in Vienna in 1997. Agreement was reached on draft guidelines for a common strategy regarding

transport and environment, which identify a number of issues on which binding agreement could be achieved.

6. To complete the set of existing ECE infrastructure-related instruments providing for European Road (AGR), rail (AGC) and combined (AGTC) networks, a new international legal instrument - the European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance (AGN) - was finalized and adopted. Following the decision to reformat the United Nations Recommendations on the Transport of Dangerous Goods into a model regulation, the European Provisions concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Inland Waterway (ADN) were finalized.

7. The quadrennial review of major changes in overall science and technology policies is being prepared, as is an update of the inventory of existing safety guidelines in biotechnology. The priorities in the field of energy are being reviewed, putting more emphasis on energy policies and issues that are common across energy industries and fuels, such as energy efficiency and energy pricing. The work on human settlements centred on the preparation for the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).

8. One priority is statistical work, carried out in close collaboration with other international agencies, particularly the European Community and OECD. ECE established a flow of essential data on the economies of all countries in transition which are stored in a flexible database. The first-ever statistical yearbook was published in 1995, providing unique statistical profiles of the 55 member States, together with comparative data on economic and social life in the region. A volume of gender-specific statistics was also published, with the help of EUROSTAT, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and Statistics Sweden.

9. The forms and methods of the Commission's activities designed to assist countries of the region in transition to a market economy were diversified. ECE technical cooperation programmes include demand-driven workshops on different aspects of transition, advisory services, training, databases and project preparations in areas such as statistics, population, energy efficiency, natural gas, trans-European railways and motorways, environment and trade facilitation.

2. Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific

10. The ESCAP secretariat continued to monitor, review and analyse the economic and social development situation in the region and disseminated relevant information to policy makers and others to make possible better understanding of the macroeconomic policies conducive to sustained economic growth, poverty alleviation and the integration of environmental concerns into macroeconomic decision- and policy-making processes.

11. Technical assistance and advisory services were provided in macroeconomic reform and policy management, especially to the economies in transition and those of the least developed, land-locked and Pacific island countries. Technical assistance also focused on issues relating to the implications of the Uruguay Round Agreements for the developing countries; integration of the

economies of non-World Trade Organization (WTO) member countries in the region into the international trading system; trade facilitation and trade efficiency; investment and industrial restructuring; multimodal transport; and tourism development, with particular emphasis on the needs of the least developed countries, island developing countries and disadvantaged economies in transition. Technical assistance was provided to land-locked countries on transport transit agreements.

12. Throughout the year, the ESCAP Pacific Operations Centre offered advisory and technical assistance to Pacific island countries in development programming, central banking, macroeconomic policy formulation, financial systems, trade promotion, development of port infrastructure and macroeconomic management, and provided short consultancies upon specific requests.

13. ESCAP endorsed the holding of a meeting of ministers of industry and technology in 1997. It also decided to organize, in collaboration with United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and with the involvement of WTO, a meeting among senior trade policy officials of the region in Jakarta in September 1996 to help them in their preparation for the first WTO Ministerial Meeting in Singapore, scheduled for December 1996.

14. "Rural poverty alleviation and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific" was the theme at the fifty-second session of the Commission. The linkages between urban poverty and various aspects of the informal sector, where most of the urban poor find employment, were studied so that policy recommendations enhancing the contribution of that sector to poverty alleviation could be formulated.

15. The Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific was held in November 1995. Three meetings of regional and subregional experts and a number of inter-agency meetings were organized in preparation for the Conference. ESCAP, at its fifty-second session, endorsed the recommendations of the Conference, the Ministerial Declaration and the Regional Action Programme for Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development, 1996-2000, calling for their early implementation, and provided guidance for follow-up action.

16. The implementation of the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project, embracing the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway projects, and facilitation of land transport continued to receive strong support from the Commission. Considerable progress was made in preparation for the Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure, to be hosted by the Government of India in New Delhi in October 1996, to launch the New Delhi Action Plan and to review phase II (1992-1996) of the Transport and Communications Decade for Asia and the Pacific.

17. The Commission carried out activities in preparation for regional contributions to HABITAT II, to be held in Istanbul in June 1996. The Second Asia-Pacific Urban Forum was convened for that purpose, focusing on building new and effective partnerships between government, civic society, the media and the private sector for better urban management.

18. The Commission undertook a series of follow-up activities to its resolution 48/3, on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002. In cooperation with members of the Regional Inter-agency Subcommittee on Disability, it continued to provide support to national efforts to meet the targets and recommendations for implementation of the Agenda for Action of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons.

19. Operational activities under the statistics subprogramme continued to focus on assisting countries to strengthen and consolidate their national statistical capacity. The Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific started to function under new arrangements as a subsidiary body of the Commission.

3. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

20. During the period under review, ECLAC carried out its activities through the following subprogrammes: Economic development; Social development; International trade, development financing and transport; Industrial, agricultural, and technological modernization; Environment, natural resources and human settlements; Statistics and economic projections; Integration of women into development; Regional integration and cooperation; Economic and social planning; and Population. In all of these fields, ECLAC collaborated with Governments of the region in the investigation and analysis of public policy, provided technical assistance and training, and promoted regional cooperation.

21. ECLAC's activities regarding public policy research focused on the monitoring of economic and social trends and dissemination of the findings in its annual publications, Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean, Economic Panorama of Latin America, Social Panorama of Latin America, and Preliminary Overview of the Economy of Latin America and the Caribbean. The Commission also continued to study the distributive aspects of economic development, with special emphasis on analysing the effects of adjustment processes on income distribution; public policies aimed at changing production patterns and promoting sustainable development and social equity, with an emphasis on assessing their effectiveness in those different spheres. Activities were also conducted in the following areas: enlargement of the regional framework of statistical information; development and dissemination of statistical information; regional cooperation on statistics; and prospective studies on development in Latin America and the Caribbean and the region's position in the global economy; the restructuring process and the design of policies to enhance the competitiveness of the countries of the region.

22. ECLAC studies in international trade, transportation and the financing of development focused on the design of policies and mechanisms to foster the continued expansion and improvement of the commercial linkages of Latin America and the Caribbean with the changing world economy, particularly in view of the current trends towards globalization in production and increasing liberalization of trade and finance.

23. In relation to natural resources and energy, it focused on addressing issues of institutional management, defining the roles of the State, particularly in regard to privatization and regulation, contributing to the

design and application of public policies for integrated natural resources management and providing support for the regional implementation of international environmental agreements that relate to natural resource management.

24. The work programme accorded high priority to the promotion of regional cooperation in functional and sectoral areas, particularly among members of the Caribbean Development Cooperation Committee and between them and the countries of Latin America. The subregional headquarters in Mexico actively participated in the establishment of the Association of Caribbean States.

25. ECLAC subregional headquarters also continued its collaboration with and support to Central American integration organizations, resulting in the realization, after many years, of a special consultation meeting of the Central American Economic Cooperation Committee. The meeting provided an opportunity to Committee members to exchange opinions and ideas on the future of Central American integration, in the light of the adjustment processes, the commitments made at the Summit of the Americas and the many negotiations in progress.

4. Economic Commission for Africa

26. During the period under review, ECA undertook several studies and the development of policy frameworks on a variety of economic and social issues in Africa's development. The studies focused on such issues as improving financing and operations of transport and communications; the enhancement of cooperation and integration in tourism; development of subregional energy supply; the use of effective marketing strategies for the enhancement of minerals utilization, poverty reduction through improved food security; problems and prospects for large-scale irrigation in Africa; the integration of environmental considerations into agricultural planning and policy strategies; enhancement of public-sector performance, especially in the area of fiscal policies; improving the targeting and allocation of public funds for rural development; urban environment and health institutions; modalities for promoting the financing of small and cottage industries in Africa; and legal procedures and modalities for negotiation and investment of African multinational projects and enterprises.

27. A particularly important activity related to the elaboration of an action plan for utilizing information technology to accelerate socio-economic development, known as the African Information Society Initiative. The action plan will serve as a reference for strategies for accelerating Africa's entry into the global information system. The plan details policy measures and actions to be adopted by member States to facilitate and enhance their integration into the global information system.

28. Another major activity related to the Framework Agenda for Building and Utilizing Critical Capacities in Africa. Work on the Framework Agenda included the country case studies, used to identify current practices and policies in selected priority areas, and consultations with relevant United Nations agencies and African experts on their experiences in assisting African countries to build their capacities.

29. ECA continued its support for follow-up activities on regional programmes - in particular, the United Nations Second Transport and Communications Decade in Africa (UNTACDA II) and the United Nations Second Industrial Development Decade in Africa (IDDA II), aimed at developing or enhancing capacities of member States for the effective implementation of those programmes. Priority attention was given to documentation and the exchange of information on methodologies adopted in addressing specific issues pertaining to the programmes.

30. ECA participated in the substantive organization and servicing of the Regional Ministerial Meeting for Africa preparatory to Habitat II. At that meeting the Johannesburg Declaration on the African Common Position for the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) was adopted.

31. The Multidisciplinary Regional Advisory Group continued to be the main vehicle for providing technical assistance support and advisory services to member States and IGO. Technical advisory services were provided by the Group on a variety of development issues, covering such areas as: inland water transport; subregional cooperation for lake basin development; implementation of the African Platform for Action on Women; formulation of development priorities, programmes and projects; economic cooperation and integration; human resources development and utilization, and energy development; criminal justice and crime prevention; mineral resources and development; agricultural development; rural development; industrial development; and science and technology development.

32. The programme of reforms and renewal of ECA, featured prominently at the thirty-first session of the Commission (30 April-8 May 1996) under the theme "Meeting the challenges of Africa's development in the twenty-first century: the role of the Economic Commission for Africa". The session also expressed appreciation for the launching of the United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa, which is the United Nations system's contribution to the implementation of the United Nations New Agenda for Development of Africa in the 1990s. It noted that the priorities of the Special Initiative were congruent with Africa's own priorities as enunciated in the Cairo Agenda for Action and the United Nations New Agenda.

5. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

33. For the period under review, ESCWA's work continued to be implemented according to a multidisciplinary approach, concentrating on socio-economic development activities, which address issues deriving from the rapidly changing global environment and its impacts on the region. ESCWA's work programme focuses on priority areas such as water, energy, sustainable development, infrastructure, specific social issues and the effects of the Middle East peace process - intraregional cooperation being the major consideration in the implementation of activities.

34. As part of its subprogramme 1. Management of natural resources and environment, ESCWA carried out studies, inter alia, on oil and natural gas in selected member countries; assessment of water resource quality in the region; promoting the use of cleaner industrial production technologies in selected ESCWA countries; and development of statistics. Meetings were held on the

implications of Agenda 21 for integrated water management in the ESCWA region and on a regional training network in the water sector. In addition, a training course on using remote-sensing data and Geographic Information System (GIS) techniques in hydrology and hydrogeology was held. Two field projects on the assessment of water resources are scheduled for completion in the biennium 1996-1997.

35. Under its subprogramme 2. Improvement of the quality of life, ESCWA undertook studies on women and poverty in the ESCWA region and on the impact of selected macroeconomic and social policies on poverty. Furthermore, ESCWA published the biennial demographic and related socio-economic indicators on human development and socio-cultural specificity - the case of the Arab world; the social dimensions of human development; the situation of disabled women, their marginalization, and measures for social integration in the ESCWA region; changing values in the Arab family; and regional perspectives of human settlements in ESCWA countries. Expert group meetings were organized in preparation for the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II) (Amman, January 1995), on demographic estimates and projections (Cairo, June 1995); entrepreneurial and managerial skills under changing conditions (Bahrain, November 1995); and on monitoring and evaluation of rural development projects (Amman, September 1995).

36. Under Subprogramme 3. Economic development and cooperation, documents were issued on the annual survey of economic and social developments in the ESCWA region, 1994; stock markets in the ESCWA region; developments and issues in the external trade and payments situation of countries of Western Asia; developments and trends in the monetary and financial sectors; revitalization of research and development activities in selected countries of the ESCWA region; and techno-economic aspects of the application of new materials in the ESCWA region.

37. Studies were carried out on such topics as upgrading the performance level and the quality of services in the field of transport and port management; the impact of structural adjustment programmes on food production; and the impact of population growth and urbanization on food consumption patterns; a study of ESCWA regional strategies for multimodal transport development and training, including a port pricing model for the ESCWA region, was undertaken in cooperation with ESCAP, with the Jordanian port of Aqaba as a pilot case.

38. Five statistical series were published: Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region; Prices and Financial Indicators in the ESCWA Region; Bulletin of National Accounts Studies of the ESCWA Region; External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region; and Bulletin of Industrial Statistics for the Arab Countries, 1995.

39. Expert group meetings were held on the development of a multimodal transport chain in Western Asia (Amman, April 1995); revitalization of research and development activities in the ESCWA region (Hurghada, Egypt, September 1995); and techno-economic aspects of the application of new materials in the ESCWA region (Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, October 1995). Several workshops were also conducted: on the International Comparison Programme (Amman, June 1995); statistical data processing on the PC (Cairo, June 1995); regional training of trainers on project planning and environmental

considerations (Ankara, September 1995); regional training of trainers on food and agricultural policy analysis (Amman, October 1995); training on the analysis and management of the agricultural sector (Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, December 1995). The Second Arab Conference and Expo for the Electronics, Software and Communications Industries in the Arab Countries (Cairo, November 1995) was organized in cooperation with AIDMO, UNIDO and other agencies.

40. Furthermore, preparations were carried out for a 1996 meeting on China and the Arab world: enhancement of interregional flows of goods and services, and for the publication of country profiles on the flow of goods, services and investment, due to be issued in 1996.

41. Activities under ESCWA's subprogramme 4. Regional development and global changes included published studies on the impact of the single European market on ESCWA countries; privatization in the Gulf countries and in Arab countries with more diversified economies; and on industrial strategies in the ESCWA region within a changing international and regional environment. An expert group meeting which addressed mainly macro-industrial policy issues was also held (Bahrain, November 1995).

42. Under subprogramme 5. Special issues, studies were undertaken on Yemen, including a review of progress made in the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the 1990s and on the occupied Palestinian territories. ESCWA held a workshop in cooperation with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on micro and small enterprise development in the occupied Palestinian territories (Gaza, April 1995), the first activity of its kind in Palestine to train members of non-governmental organizations and other institutions in strategic planning, project formulation and service delivery.

43. In addition to the activities under its regular programme of work, the ESCWA secretariat continued its technical cooperation activities involving the identification, formulation and implementation of technical assistance projects. Furthermore, ESCWA extended regional advisory services to its member States in the areas of agriculture, data-processing, energy, environment, industry, national accounts, social development, transport, water resources and WTO/GATT issues.

B. Follow-up activities to recent global conferences

44. Recent global conferences make explicit reference to regions for the follow-up to and implementation of the commitments taken. All the regional commissions have initiated activities in that respect, in line with the functions assigned to them in the programme or platform for action adopted at the conferences.

45. Those activities, mainly undertaken through inter-agency meetings convened by the regional commissions, aim at facilitating cooperation among United Nations institutions and other regional or subregional organizations which are active in the region concerned on cross-sectoral issues.

1. International Conference on Population and Development

46. ECE took part in meetings of the Ad Hoc Inter-Agency Task Force on the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Follow-up and its working groups, representing the regional commissions particularly with regard to international migration. It initiated and coordinated consultations among the regional commissions on proposed interregional cooperation on the impact of international migration in countries of origin and countries of destination.

47. ECE, in consultation with UNFPA, formulated a population programme for 1996-1999, as follow-up to the ICPD and the European Population Conference, (EPC) particularly in countries with economies in transition. The programme will supply Governments and non-governmental organizations with the data, analysis and conclusions needed to monitor the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the EPC Recommendations.

48. In November 1995 ESCAP organized the first session of the Interorganization Subcommittee on Population and Development in Asia and the Pacific, aimed at implementing the Bali Declaration on Population and Sustainable Development and the Programme of Action of the ICPD. In addition, during the period under review, various intercountry research projects and training courses were conducted. Technical assistance was provided relating to areas such as reproductive health and family planning, the family and the elderly, female migration, demographic analysis and information development. Activities of the Asia-Pacific Population Information Network (Asia-Pacific POPIN) focused on upgrading members' technical skills in database development, improving population information management and networking, and information dissemination.

49. At the twenty-fifth session of ECLAC (Cartagena, April 1994) it was agreed that the ideas generated by the International Conference on Population and Development should be incorporated into the Regional Plan of Action. That was done in late 1995, with full participation of the member countries of ECLAC. The Plan, in addition to objectives, goals and recommendations for action in the field of population and development, includes several regional and subregional activities to be undertaken to facilitate the achievements of national objectives. At the twenty-sixth session of ECLAC (San José, April 1996), CELADE, as technical secretariat of the Regional Plan of Action and the sessional Ad Hoc Committee on Population and Development, reported on recent socio-demographic trends and developments in Latin America; specific challenges to be addressed in the near future; institutionalization of population policies; regional and subregional activities carried out in the sphere of the Regional Plan; and the possibility of obtaining extrabudgetary funding for several activities included in the Plan.

50. At ECA, activities undertaken in implementation of the Programme of Action of ICPD have taken a variety of forms. ECA has prepared studies related to the implementation of the development frameworks; convened a workshop for experts and non-governmental organizations on the Dakar/Ngor Declaration (DND) and the Programme of Action; participated in joint missions of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the African Development Bank (ADB) and ECA of the African Population Commission to assess country experiences of some member States (Senegal, South Africa and Zimbabwe) on the implementation of the DND and the

Programme of Action; and convened a Senior Policy Seminar on the social impact of HIV/AIDS in households and family in Africa (Addis Ababa, 2-4 October 1995).

51. To harmonize the activities and the resources of the Follow-up Committee and the African Population Commission (APC), the second meeting of the Follow-up Committee will be organized as a preparatory forum to the second General Assembly of APC. A joint OAU/ECA task force has been entrusted with the responsibility for coordinating all preparatory activities leading to the two meetings.

52. Since July 1995, ESCWA's follow-up to ICPD has gone in two complementary and mutually supporting directions: the implementation of a UNFPA-supported project on population policies in the Arab countries of ESCWA and the North African region to assist interested Governments in building national capacity for the formulation of policies matching the ICPD Programme of Action; and the formulation of a project that aims at establishing, both at the national and regional levels, a follow-up mechanism to the ICPD Programme of Action and to the Second Amman Declaration on Population and Development. The project's overall strategy consists of providing an appropriate framework for continued interaction among the various actors - governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, international and United Nations bodies involved in the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action. It has three major components: creating awareness; developing national and regional frameworks to monitor the progress made in the implementation of the Programme of Action; and establishing national and regional systems to ensure the continuous flow of information on that implementation.

2. World Summit for Social Development

53. As follow-up to the Social Summit, the ECE senior economic advisers decided to convene a workshop on managing the social consequences of structural change in transition economies, to be held in Paris from 1 to 2 July 1996. It is intended to provide a forum for joint reflection and exchange of experiences between experts and senior officials in charge of economic and social policies in both transition and developed market economies.

54. Another workshop, to be held in Geneva in the fall of 1996, will be devoted to poverty and vulnerable ageing populations. Population ageing is one of the most salient long-term developments in the region. The aim of the workshop will be to define strategies for providing income security in old age with an emphasis on eradication of poverty among the most vulnerable groups of older people.

55. ESCAP, endorsed the Agenda for Action on Social Development, which had been adopted by the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference (Manila, October 1994), in preparation for the World Summit for Social Development. As called for in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Summit, the Commission also requested the Executive Secretary, among other follow-up activities, to convene a regional ministerial conference on social development in 1997 to review and assess the progress achieved towards attaining the goals and targets of the Agenda for Action, to consider means of enhancing regional

cooperation in support of the Agenda, and to convene other such meetings at a high political level on a biennial basis. The secretariat is accordingly undertaking the preparatory activities in consultation with the concerned United Nations bodies and specialized agencies, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.

56. The following other follow-up activities in implementing the regional Agenda for Action on Social Development were taken: a publication entitled "Enhancing the role of NGOs in implementation of the Agenda for Action in the ESCAP region" was prepared and disseminated; a regional workshop on guidelines for implementation of the Agenda for Action in the ESCAP region was convened (Bangkok, 25-29 March 1996); an expert group meeting on the enhancement of social security for the poor was held (Bangkok, 20-24 November 1995); a meeting of senior officials on a policy framework for lifelong preparation for old age was convened (Bangkok, 7-10 May 1996). Various activities are being undertaken in pursuance of Commission resolutions 51/10, on regional collaboration for the eradication of the demand for drugs subject to abuse and related problems, and 52/5, on regional cooperation in response to the spread and consequences of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in the Asian and Pacific region.

57. ECLAC participated in two follow-up meetings: the Summit Meeting of Social Welfare Ministers from the Rio Group, organized by the Department of Social Development of Argentina (Buenos Aires, 4-6 May 1995) and the regional technical follow-up meeting on the agreements reached at the World Summit for Social Development, organized by the technical secretariat of the Ecuador Social Front and the Rio Group (Quito, Ecuador, 15-17 November 1995). In addition, ECLAC collaborated with the Government of Chile in the organization of the Hemispheric Conference on the Eradication of Poverty and Discrimination (Santiago, 18-19 January 1996).

58. In relation to the mandate of the Summit to convene, on a biennial basis and in cooperation with regional organizations and banks, a meeting at a high political level to evaluate progress made towards fulfilling the outcome of the Summit, the Government of Brazil offered to host such a meeting in Sao Paolo in March 1997.

59. The Conference of African Ministers responsible for Human Development, in conjunction with its Follow-up Ministerial Committee of Fifteen, is the intergovernmental machinery of ECA for monitoring the implementation of the Programme of Action in Africa. By providing a forum for sharing experience on policies and practices relating to social development in various African countries, the Conference and its follow-up Committee serve a catalytic role in implementing the various recommendations of the World Summit. The Ministerial Follow-up Committee of Fifteen held its first in Addis Ababa from 13 to 16 November 1995.

60. ECA's Human Development in Africa is the main vehicle for reporting on the trends and developments relating to social and human development in Africa. The 1995 report is the first in a series that is planned to appear every two years. Each report will focus on selected critical issues and provide in-depth analysis. The inaugural issue focused on the themes "Goals for the child",

"Health for all", and "Basic education for all". The Committee of Fifteen agreed that the next issue of the report should include measurable indicators to assess the progress made in advancing social development at the country level. It was proposed that the report should focus on the following issues: follow-up to the implementation of the commitments made at the World Summit and other major United Nations conferences in the areas of human and social development, with a view to analysing the extent to which the commitments had been met, and their impact; and innovative efforts made by Governments in Africa to foster human development, with particular emphasis on developing indicators on the state of community participation, the role and impact of the cooperatives sector, and food security. The report will serve as a tool for inter-agency monitoring at the regional level since several agencies make valuable contribution to its preparation.

61. In its follow-up to the Copenhagen Declaration, ESCWA carried out several activities during the reporting period. It published seven studies on poverty - concepts, measurement and determinants, and policies. Three of the studies entail poverty profiles for selected countries of the ESCWA region. In addition, a comprehensive study that proposes a region-specific model for poverty measurement and a social perspective of poverty for the region were prepared. ESCWA will emphasize the evaluation of policies and measures to combat poverty adopted by certain countries in the region. It is currently coordinating with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the design of profiles for poverty alleviation policies in four specific sectors in Lebanon - namely, health, education, employment and fiscal policy. With regard to the theme of social integration, ESCWA has established the first Arab regional computer training centre for blind women/girls, located in Amman, Jordan.

3. Fourth World Conference on Women

62. In line with the functions assigned to the regional commissions, ECE convened a meeting in January 1996 of the United Nations organizations and regional and subregional institutions active in women's issues in the ECE region. The meeting constituted the first stage in monitoring the implementation of both the ECE regional Platform for Action and the Beijing global Platform for Action. The meeting encouraged collaborative efforts on concrete activities and envisaged small working groups for joint programming in order to maximize efficiency among agencies showing the same areas of concern. It was also recommended that organizations join forces to seek financial support from public and private sectors, including regional development banks. The preparation of a concerted regional plan of action was envisaged.

63. The recommendations were presented to the Third Meeting of the European Regional Representatives of ACC (Geneva, February 1996). The participating agencies endorsed and supported the approach adopted by the inter-agency consultative meeting for ensuring the regional follow-up to both the regional and global Platforms for Action.

64. In the Asia and Pacific region, the regional Jakarta Declaration and Plan of Action identified 10 critical areas of concern that correspond with areas of concerns in the global Platform for Action. Many countries in the region have

started to develop national plans of action or adapt existing plans to implement the Platform for Action often through coordinated action involving Governments, non-governmental organizations and other collaborative partners. ESCAP has been involved with countries in the development of the national plans and will be closely monitoring the implementation of both the global Platform for Action and the regional Plan.

65. At the organizational level, an interdivisional mechanism was initiated to ensure integration of the priorities of the global and regional mandates into the work programme of ESCAP. At the regional level, ESCAP convened on 19 October 1995 the first meeting of the Regional Inter-agency Subcommittee on the Advancement of Women. It was attended by 12 United Nations bodies and specialized agencies. It is envisaged that this inter-agency mechanism will facilitate the exchange of information and provide the institutional framework for joint and collaborative activities.

66. The first of a series of expert group meetings addressed women's participation in decision-making in politics, government and the private sector (Bangkok, 18-19 December 1995). The meeting brought together experts from Governments, non-governmental organizations, academia and United Nations agencies to review and analyse measures and institutional mechanisms to promote the participation of women in decision-making and to recommend action to implement policy changes. Two expert group meetings on the critical issue of women's rights/violence against women and the feminization of poverty and a seminar on strengthening national machineries for the advancement of women will be held in the second half of 1996.

67. A project on improving the status of women in poverty has been launched. It will undertake a regional survey focusing on female-headed and female-maintained households in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and the Philippines. A subregional project on promoting the participation of women in the economic development of Indochina (covering Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam) has begun, and a project on social protection for poor self-employed women is being discussed.

68. ECLAC acts as the technical secretariat of member countries for the implementation of the regional Programme of Action for the Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, 1995-2001, whose approval was confirmed by ECLAC at its twenty-sixth session. The Programme was ECLAC's contribution to the Beijing Platform for Action. For the follow-up and evaluation process, ECLAC has a permanent organ composed of the regional conference and its presiding officers. ECLAC carries out research on the priority themes, provides technical assistance, and holds technical meetings, in coordination with the Division for the Advancement of Women, various organizations of the United Nations system, the Latin American and Caribbean countries, and non-governmental organizations.

69. After the Fourth World Conference on Women, ECA organized a meeting of the Bureau of the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women which prepared the African regional platform for the World Conference. The main objective of the meeting was to discuss a framework for accelerating the implementation in Africa of the global and regional Platforms for Action. The framework was subsequently endorsed by the African Regional Coordinating Committee for the integration of

women in development at its seventeenth meeting (Addis Ababa, 24-26 April 1996). ARCC is the principal intergovernmental body of the Commission which provides policy guidance on women's issues in the region. To enhance the effectiveness of ARCC as a monitoring mechanism, its members requested ECA to undertake an in-depth evaluation of its role and function. They also decided to include the president of the Regional Conference on Women in their Bureau and to expand its membership from 15 to 19 countries.

70. ECA has undertaken several advisory missions on gender within the context of the Platform: two to member States, one to the Commonwealth Secretariat, and two to NGOs dealing with gender and development. Through its advisory services, ECA seeks to foster integration of a gender perspective into the policies, plans and programmes of member States and advocacy groups in various countries of the region. Efforts to promote the economic empowerment of women are ongoing and, in collaboration with OAU and United Nations agencies, a forum of women leaders focusing on the role of women in the peace process is envisaged.

71. ESCWA organized in collaboration with UNIFEM, UNFPA, UNDP and the Lebanese Joint National Preparatory Committee, the Regional Workshop on Leadership and Lobbying Skills and Coordination among Arab Official Delegations to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beirut, 6-8 July 1995), under the umbrella of the League of Arab States.

72. An informal ad hoc inter-agency group on women was established by ESCWA in Amman (UNIFEM, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCO, UNDP, World Food Programme (WFP), and UNRWA) to streamline and coordinate activities in preparation for the Conference in order to avoid duplication and to explore the possibilities for future cooperation in implementation of joint activities. After the Conference, the group was formalized into the Task Force on Gender, to monitor and follow up implementation of the Arab Plan of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action at the regional level and to provide coordinated support and technical assistance to member States in their follow-up activities.

4. Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

73. In the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States ESCAP is a link between the island countries plus their subregional organizations and the Commission on Sustainable Development in New York. In line with the agreement made at the twenty-fifth session of the South Pacific Forum, a regional mechanism consisting of a support unit, utilizing the resources and services of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme and the ESCAP/Pacific Operations Centre, and an advisory committee composed of senior officials would coordinate and facilitate the implementation of the decisions taken at the Conference.

74. The ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean has carried out a number of activities designed to implement the Programme of Action adopted at the Conference. A regional meeting of experts was organized by ECLAC (Port of Spain, May 1995) to examine progress made in the implementation and a coordinating mechanism, comprising ECLAC and CARICOM, supported by other

agencies, was agreed on for follow-up in the Caribbean. Both the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) member Governments approved the establishment of a Joint Coordinating Unit, located at the ECLAC Office in Port of Spain, and a project has been developed and submitted to the European Union for funding. The Office has prepared studies on a number of topics related to the Programme of Action, including one on information for coastal zone management. A data bank of all relevant projects being implemented in the Caribbean has been created.

II. TRENDS IN REGIONAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COOPERATION, INCLUDING TRADE ISSUES

75. World output recovered significantly in 1994, and the volume of world trade, which grew at 9.5 per cent in 1994, the fastest in many years, was followed by a further expansion of 7 per cent in 1995. Forecasts indicate similar high rates of growth in the volume of world trade during 1996 and 1997, buoyed by, among other factors, the implementation of the Uruguay Round agreements. Although the industrialized countries still accounted for 70 per cent of world trade, an expansion of import demands in the developing countries, especially in parts of the ESCAP region, will continue to be a contributing factor - and an increasingly significant one, at that - to the growth of world trade.

76. Generally, many of the developing economies have carried out sustained domestic policy reforms and have sought to liberalize their trade policies by reducing direct State intervention in foreign trade transactions, removing controls on exports and creating predictable and transparent import policies. The enhanced level of economic activity, however, has not had a similar or proportionate impact in strengthening intraregional trade and investment in all the regions, nor has it prompted equally effective response in addressing social development concerns.

77. In the ECE region economic growth has become increasingly divergent over the past year. While Western Europe has experienced a sharp deceleration, Eastern Europe now stands out as an area of rapid growth. Domestic activity in Western Europe continued to be supported by export growth in 1995, although the net effect was smaller than in 1994 because of a slow-down in intra-Western European trade.

78. For the transition economies of ECE, the shift in the geographical distribution of trade and its product composition suggest that enterprises have adapted well to the new trading environment. With the collapse of the old trading networks, producers in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States redirected their trade towards the industrialized West, particularly towards the European Union. Their products have been specially tailored to those markets and to new comparative advantages. However, despite these developments, the volume and structure of trade of the transition economies demonstrates a continuing need for improvement and support. The volume and value of trade in many of the transition economies is small and in the case of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), very small indeed. There is a lack of intraregional trade, even though the countries belonging to the Central European Free Trade Agreement have

enjoyed increases in their mutual trade. The commodity composition of trade in many transition economies is concentrated on a few products and dependent on the economic health of a relatively few number of countries in convertible currency markets. These structural weaknesses in trade leave a question mark over the long-term sustainability of the trade recovery experienced by some of the transition economies.

79. Eastern Europe is now very dependent on Western Europe as an export market - nearly two thirds of its exports now go to developed market economies there. Eastern Europe is, therefore, more vulnerable to a slow-down in Western European import demands. Similar considerations apply to the Baltic States, whose exports to Western Europe have been growing rapidly and now account for probably just over 50 per cent of the total.

80. The generally strong economic performance of the developing ESCAP economies over the past few years has been accompanied by increased economic interdependence in the region. This has largely been manifested in the growing importance of intraregional trade within the region, from 43.5 per cent in 1985 to 51.2 per cent in 1993. Although the underlying forces for increased intraregional trade have been largely autonomous and market-driven, recent years have witnessed a conscious search for increased trading opportunities at the regional and subregional levels, mainly in the form of import liberalization arrangements.

81. The intensification of trade ties and investment flows within the ESCAP region was stimulated by a number of factors, including the appreciation of the yen, a shift by Japan from its strategy of exporting to countries outside the region to greater focus on intraregional trade, and the sustained economic growth and strengthening of demands in the East and South-east Asian countries. Thus, unlike economic integration forces in Western Europe, which were institutionalized, the development of economic linkages in the ESCAP region was both an intermediate step towards achieving the multilateralism enshrined in GATT/WTO and the result of growing internationalization of the production process through cross-country industrial networks for extracting the optimal agglomeration advantages.

82. Regional economic cooperation in the ESCAP region has therefore been of a functional nature, reflecting the coupling together of economies at different stages of development but with similar orientation in their foreign trade strategies. The heterogeneity of the developing ESCAP region provided the basic complementarities that countries needed for the mutual stimulation of their economies, and competitiveness was derived from an almost common reliance on export-led economic growth policies. Such cooperation enabled the developing ESCAP economies to benefit in double harness. First, flexibility of domestic production was enhanced through technology transfer and skill development and greater flows of capital and scarce inputs, which eased supply constraints. Secondly, productive efficiency was increased by the relocation of production facilities according to shifting comparative advantage and the integration of production processes across countries to acquire economies of scale.

83. Cooperation initiatives in the ESCAP region, with spillover implications for trade expansion, have focused on the establishment of growth triangles and

subregional growth zones in an area involving three or more countries and the development of river basins across country borders.

84. In the ECLAC region, the boom in intraregional trade continued to be a driving force for the region's external trade. The region's overall performance was helped by the jump in demand in Brazil, as a result of the success in its stabilization plan. In 1995, trade among the ECLAC members continued to increase more than their trade with the rest of the world. The subregional groups of countries made an active contribution to this growth. One example is the evolution of trade within the South American Common Market/Mercado Común Sudamericano (MERCOSUR), where, in spite of the difficulties that affected the external accounts of their two principal members, trade within the group came to represent 22 per cent of their members' total trade, compared with 19 per cent in 1994. In the Andean Group, the percentage rose from 10 per cent to nearly 12 per cent over the same period. As in the previous year, the terms of trade improved in most of the region, largely due to higher commodity prices.

85. Although most of the countries in Latin America continued progressing towards macroeconomic stability with growth, which is so essential for creating an atmosphere conducive to strengthening regional cooperation, in many areas their growth was not sufficient to reduce the "social deficits" accumulated in earlier years. In fact, the recovery of growth in the first years of the decade was not reflected in significant reductions in unemployment. With respect to social equity in general, of those economies that completed the phase of recovery and now operate in the new macroeconomic and regulatory conditions at a high level of utilization of productive capacity, only two countries achieved levels of inequality lower than those prior to the crisis.

86. Higher commodity prices also helped the African countries. Provisional estimates by ECA show that their export earnings increased by 11.1 per cent in 1995, as compared to 4.9 per cent in 1994. However, African countries remained unsuccessful in diversifying their external trade from commodities, which had a bearing on intraregional trade and contributed to their inability to take advantage of the growth in world trade. Between 1990 and 1995, Africa's share of world trade declined by a staggering 30 per cent, from 3.1 per cent to 2.2 per cent. The loss in market share is even more drastic relative to trade of the developing countries, declining from 11 per cent in 1990 to 6 per cent in 1995, a loss of 45 per cent.

87. Intra-African trade is the weak link in regional cooperation and integration. It is in the range of 3-6 per cent of total regional trade. This is attributable to several factors: most of the countries produce similar agricultural products; trade and payment arrangements for intraregional export trade are either weak or non-existent; and information on new tradeable products is limited. In consequence, much emphasis is being placed on strengthening policies for trade promotion, centred on horizontal and vertical diversification of traditional African export products. To achieve this goal, African countries need to develop not only skills and expertise for processing their agricultural products but also the institutional arrangements to further intra-African trade.

88. Their adverse economic situation has led to the gradual erosion of social infrastructures. Rapid population growth and severe cut-backs in public

expenditure, often in connection with debt-rescheduling and economic restructuring, have culminated in a near collapse of the educational infrastructure. Public expenditure on education in sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest in the world. Civil conflicts and political stalemates in governance have continued to disrupt and paralyse production in several countries (especially Burundi, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, the Sudan and Zaire), with important repercussions on social services, regional cooperation and intraregional trade.

89. Economic reform and structural adjustment programmes, adopted to correct internal and external imbalances in a rapidly globalizing world economy, continued to be implemented in most ESCWA member countries. An increasingly outward-looking development strategy in those countries also encouraged privatization programmes and strengthened the private sector's participation in the economy, for which new investment and tax laws were formulated.

90. Due to many economic, political and historical consideration, there is considerable potential for regional and subregional cooperation among ESCWA member countries. Unfortunately, however, that potential has not been fully realized. Despite many years of attempts to increase intraregional cooperation and trade, ESCWA intraregional trade, for instance, has rarely exceeded 10 per cent of the region's total foreign trade.

A. Subregional cooperation and integration groupings

91. With growing awareness of their potential, subregional and integration groupings are gaining new impetus in different parts of the world. In Europe, the emerging significance of the single European market dominates the scene, and the transition countries are seeking new avenues for cooperation through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Members of the latter groups have made considerable progress in the transition from central planning to market economy. Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation and Belarus (the first three are also members of ESCAP) signed a treaty in March 1996 on deepening economic integration among them.

92. In Latin America, MERCOSUR and the Andean Group have further consolidated the important contributions being made by them to the process of regional integration. In matters related to free trade and regional integration, the Summit of the Americas of December 1994 resolved to begin immediately to construct a free trade area in the Americas and to conclude the negotiations no later than 2005. With the objective of facilitating the gradual convergence of existing economic integration agreements, the Summit directed the Organization of American States (OAS), with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), ECLAC, and other specialized regional and subregional organizations, to continue studying economic integration arrangements in the region.

93. A majority of the ESCAP developing countries are members of one of the four active subregional organizations - namely, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the South Pacific Forum. To

foster economic cooperation in trade, the ASEAN countries have evolved the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA); ECO has its Protocol on Preferential Tariffs (PPT); while SAARC countries have recently approved the SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA). They have also expressed their intention to pursue free trade by establishing the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). A large number of the South Pacific islands are participants in the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Agreement (SPARTECA). Though none of these organizations has had a smooth evolution, AFTA has made considerable headway towards achieving its eventual objective of a free trade area by the year 2003.

94. Some of the major trading economies of the region around the Pacific Ocean are also active in interregional economic cooperation initiatives, such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) which has come into force and aims to establish free trade by 2010 for the developed member countries and by 2020 for the developing member countries. This, and the subregional trading arrangements cited above, are all GATT-consistent and seek trade liberalization, in most instances at a faster pace than would be possible under WTO. Some of the region's developing countries would thus have simultaneously to face the twin challenges of meeting the requirements of WTO membership (of WTO accession, where membership is awaited) and liberalization of trade under the subregional/interregional schemes of which they are members.

95. Regional cooperation in Africa centred around integration is showing much promise and dynamism. The implementation of the treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC), which entered into force in May 1994, is gathering momentum. African countries view regional cooperation and integration not only as a way to overcome the several disadvantages associated with the small size of their economies but also as a strategic response in a world that is increasingly dominated by regional economic or trading blocs. The momentum generated by the treaty led to an increased pace of work in preparing the protocols for the treaty, the convening of the first session of the Economic and Social Commission of the AEC from 6-11 June 1996, and efforts to strengthen the subregional economic groups to serve as building blocks of AEC, as envisaged in the treaty. The five major subregional economic groupings in Africa are: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Common Market of East and Southern Africa (COMESA); the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) and the Economic Community of Central Africa States (ECCAS).

96. A major trend in cooperation in Africa is the revitalization or strengthening of certain subregional or functional economic groupings. For example, the members of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) have a common currency - the CFA - and intend to establish a customs union within the next two years. The Union is also working on a joint investment code for its members and developing a common legal framework to facilitate business transactions. The East African Community, consisting of Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Kenya, which was dissolved in the late 1970s, was recently revived. The Inter-Governmental Group on Drought and Development (IGADD) which brings together Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, the Sudan and Uganda, is deepening areas of cooperation among member States.

97. In the ESCWA region, two important arrangements in the area of trade have sprung from the League of Arab Nations Agreement: the Arab Common Market Arrangement, and the Council of Arab Economic Unity. Among ESCWA member countries there are two subregional arrangements: the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC). Membership in the former is strictly confined to the Gulf States - namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; while that in the latter includes Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and the Republic of Yemen, with membership open to all other Arab countries. Although it has not been officially dismantled, activities of ACC were suspended shortly after the Gulf crisis, especially after Egypt withdrew its membership.

B. Interregional cooperation

98. The increasing globalization of the world economy and the process of trade liberalization are opening up new possibilities and opportunities for cooperation among countries near and far. Accordingly, interregional cooperation is also being actively promoted.

99. A recent development was the summit meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the 15 member States of the European Union and of 10 Asian countries (the seven ASEAN countries plus China, Japan and the Republic of Korea) (Bangkok, 1-2 March). It was the first Asia/Europe Meeting (ASEM) at the summit level. Discussions focused on ways to promote economic cooperation, encourage investment and facilitate trade. The future agenda includes the creation of an Asia/Europe Business Forum to be initiated in France later this year, an Asia/Europe Foundation to be established in Singapore, and a private/public-sector working group to draw up an Asia/Europe plan to promote investment. Future ASEM summits are planned for 1998 (to be held in Britain) and for the year 2000 (in the Republic of Korea). The move to ASEM comes in recognition of the strong economic ties that have developed between the United States and Asia and the growing realization that Europe, too, should play a greater role in Asia. Other nations have expressed interest in joining the group, including Australia, India, New Zealand and Russia.

100. During 1995, two political events, the Middle-East North African Economic Summit (MENA) and the Europe Mediterranean Conference, entailed initiatives to strengthen cooperation among the countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa, on the one hand, and among the countries around the Mediterranean, on the other. The anticipated benefits stemming from them are expected to have a positive effect on trade and economic growth. A comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East, when achieved, is also expected to give a strong boost to confidence among investors, both domestic and foreign, in that region's viability.

101. At the MENA Summit, transport projects were regarded as essential for increasing intraregional trade and regional cooperation. A subregional rail network linked to North Africa and Europe is under consideration by some countries of the region. A road/rail bridge over the Suez Canal is being negotiated between Egypt and prospective financiers. Also, projects for the development of seaports and airports in the Gulf of Aqaba are being formulated

in the neighbouring countries. An important element in the respective programmes for the Transport and Communication Decade of ESCAP and ESCWA has been to develop transport and communications linkages between the two regions and on to Europe.

C. Work of the regional commissions

102. The regional commissions address issues on regional economic cooperation, including those on trade, through their respective programmes of work in pursuance of legislative mandates from their relevant subsidiary bodies and in coordination with other relevant international organizations including UNCTAD, WTO and ITC. In all cases, a basic area of their work pertains to the collection and dissemination of trade information and statistics and the provision of assistance to their developing membership on the development of a trade and business information system.

103. For ECE the following activities are notable:

(a) Setting of norms and standards: ECE lowers the transaction costs of traders by harmonizing and setting standards - for example, quality standards for fresh and dried agricultural produce, technical specifications for motor vehicle parts;

(b) Facilitation of trade: through its working party on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures, ECE acts as a global focal point for harmonizing the interests of different regions and industry groupings to simplify international trade transactions. In addition, the United Nations/ECE Convention on International Transport of Goods by Road significantly reduces the waiting period at border-crossing for freight transport;

(c) Legal frameworks for privatization and investment promotion: United Nations/ECE legal experts are active in the preparation of guides, model contracts and standards clauses aimed at facilitating new private businesses and in adapting property laws and procedures to market economy principles. In the energy field, energy-efficient demonstration zones are being designed to offer a location for investors which is safe from some of the deficiencies in rules and regulations which exist outside;

(d) Infrastructure: in the areas of transport, the ECE Trans-European North-South Motorway (TEM) project and the Trans-European Railway (TER) project, are developing transport systems vital for trade. In the areas of financing, a private-sector group is currently preparing guidelines for concession-based financing of infrastructure, including the method of Build Operate and Transfer (BOT);

(e) Financing of trade: analysis of needs of transition economies in trade finance have been undertaken, and important proposals for building trade-finance capacities are being discussed.

104. ESCAP, in addition to providing assistance in the establishment of a number of commodity consultative mechanisms (such as in pepper, coconut, jute, silk,

tropical timber, and coffee), has promoted three major regional initiatives: the Bangkok Agreement, the Asian Clearing Union, and the Asian Reinsurance Corporation. The Bangkok Agreement, which became operative in July 1976, is a preferential trading arrangement designed to liberalize and expand trade in the ESCAP region progressively through an exchange of tariff preferences, relaxation of non-tariff barriers etc. It is GATT-consistent and has been ratified by Bangladesh, India, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Republic of Korea and Sri Lanka, while China and Papua New Guinea are in the process of acceding to it. The Asian Clearing Union (ACU) commenced operations in 1975 as a regional payments arrangement to assist developing economies to overcome temporary hard-currency shortages in trade financing. ACU is now seeking to diversify its role and to improve the responsiveness of its operations by allowing member countries to settle all accounts in freely convertible currencies, specifically in United States dollars. Its membership includes the central banks of Bangladesh, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Asian Reinsurance Corporation was established in 1979 with the aim of reducing the foreign exchange outflow from its members arising from insurance and reinsurance payments by Asian and Pacific countries.

105. The work programme of the ESCAP secretariat in regional economic cooperation also includes promoting subregional economic cooperation and intersubregional cooperation. A notable development is the annual consultative meeting of executive heads of subregional organizations in Asia and the Pacific (ASEAN, ECO, SAARC, Forum Secretariat and South Pacific Commission (SPC) and ESCAP), undertaken at ESCAP's initiative. Its third meeting is tentatively scheduled in Tehran in November/December 1996. The areas identified for cooperation among the subregional organizations, with ESCAP playing a catalytic role, are trade and investment, infrastructure development, energy, human resources development and poverty alleviation. In the context of subregional cooperation, particular mention could be made of ESCAP's assistance to countries of north-east Asia in evolving cooperation modalities in the areas of trade and investment, infrastructure development and environmental protection. In order to facilitate the strengthening of cooperation between the various subregional organizations, ESCAP carried out a number of studies during 1995-1996, at their request, focusing on trade and investment prospects.

106. In a resolution adopted at its fifty-second session, the Commission endorsed the recommendations of the Committee for Transport, Communications and Tourism that the Asian land-transport infrastructure development project (ALTID), comprising the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway projects, and land transport facilitation, should constitute a priority activity in the secretariat's programme of work. It urged members and associate members to lend full support and cooperation to the secretariat in implementing activities under the ALTID project and, specifically, to seek ways and means of constructing the missing highway and railway links, of upgrading and/or extending existing links and of constructing the new links that have been identified as part of the two networks and to consider the possibility of acceding to related international conventions and international transit conventions. It requested the secretariat to undertake a number of supportive activities and to coordinate the effective implementation of the ALTID project with the Economic Commission for Europe, so

as to ensure eventual compatibility of standards and requirements and avoid duplication of work.

107. In compliance with the mandate given by the Summit of the Americas, held in December 1994, ECLAC has actively participated in several working groups, producing substantive results, particularly in matters related to smaller economies and market access. In that framework ECLAC has prepared four studies on issues of free trade in the Americas.

108. In addition, at the end of its twenty-sixth session, ECLAC signed a broad cooperation agreement with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which will strengthen the work of both institutions for the benefit of the region. The activities subject to coordination will be chosen from among those currently under way by both institutions, so as, on the one hand, to reinforce the attainment of their goals and, on the other hand, to avoid duplication. Such cooperation may be in the areas of economic integration, intraregional trade, population issues, statistics, social policies, citizens' security, macroeconomics, transport or the environment.

109. ECA has been instrumental in the establishment of many of the subregional economic groupings on the continent. Currently, it is actively involved, together with OAU and ADB, in the joint secretariat established by an OAU Summit resolution of 1989 and in supporting the implementation of the Treaty on AEC, especially in drafting protocols envisaged under the Treaty.

110. As regards intra-African trade expansion, ECA emphasizes the need for member States to diversify their production structures in order to increase the variety of tradeable goods within the framework of subregional economic groupings. In 1995, ECA organized a regional workshop on rationalization of markets to assist the expansion of intra-African trade in the light of the Abuja Treaty, establishing the Pan African Economic Community. It is also assisting member States in implementation of the eight-year intra-African Trade Development Plan. ECA has also undertaken a number of recent studies devoted to Africa's external trade prospects and promotion. They cover enhancing intra-African trade; Africa within the new trade order; the implications of the World Trade Organization in Africa; mid-term review of Lomé IV; trade development and cooperation; the impact of the Uruguay Round agreements on economic integration in Africa; and commodity trade: the case of coffee.

111. The future orientation of ECA's work in the area of trade and regional integration is indicated in its strategic framework document, entitled "Serving Africa better: strategic directions for the Economic Commission for Africa". The document, which was endorsed at the 1996 session of the Commission, sees ECA's work over the next five years as revolving around the three tasks indicated in the first phase of the Treaty on AEC, namely: enhancing the institutional capacities of subregional organizations in consolidating their integration; rationalizing the myriad intergovernmental organizations dedicated to integration; and accelerating cross-border liberalization and harmonization in trade, investment, and monetary and fiscal policies.

D. Current and proposed interregional cooperation

112. Most constraints to the promotion of regional cooperation, especially in trade, are specific to a region, but some of them are also common to all regions. Thus, there is potential for interregional cooperation. In particular, the trade facilitation programme has universal appeal.

113. The United Nations/ECE is the home of the United Nations/EDIFACT system. Cooperative arrangements have already been made with ESCAP and are being proposed to other regional commissions. The setting of norms and standards can also involve other regions. For example, work by a United Nations/ECE group on establishing guidelines on concessionary financing methods for infrastructure already involves other regional commissions. Finally, the private sector plays an increasingly important role in ECE activities. Its expertise is used to help countries schedule reforms and make priorities. Its work on standards helps Governments design innovative and effective policies that can attract foreign direct investment. Such cooperation between the commissions on their experiences in channelling private-sector skills and expertise to best effect could be developed.

1. Trade facilitation

114. Under an arrangement with ECE, ESCAP has become a Mirror Site for Trade Facilitation Information Exchange (TraFIX) on the Internet World Wide Web (WWW) of ECE (URL address is: ecie.un.or.th). ECE has provided ESCAP with all relevant material on trade facilitation and will also provide regular updates of the contents; ESCAP's contribution is the provision of additional information pertaining to the region. This arrangement would benefit the trade practitioners in the region through quick and cost-effective methods of accessing global information on trade facilitation.

115. ESCAP has recently instituted an exchange of information between the ESCAP Regional Trade Information Network (TISNET) and the ECA Pan-African Documentation and Information Service (PADIS), through electronic mail (e-mail).

2. Studies on trade and investment cooperation

116. ESCAP and ECLAC have agreed to cooperate in an interregional project, developed by UNCTAD and funded by UNDP, in which the two commissions will undertake studies on the prospects and potential for mutual trade and investment cooperation among their concerned members which will provide the basis for a ministerial meeting of those countries, to be organized by UNCTAD. The proposal is now awaiting final clearance from UNDP and is likely to be implemented during 1996-1997.

3. Cooperation involving countries on the Indian Ocean

117. Several countries on the Indian Ocean appear to be positively inclined to the idea of developing some kind of cooperation, and two meetings among

officials have been convened in Australia and Mauritius to develop an approach to such cooperation. At a technical-level meeting (New Delhi, December 1995), cooperation among research institutions and cooperation among the apex national chambers of commerce and industry of interested countries were accepted as feasible propositions. Several activities have been earmarked for subsequent implementation, and follow-up meetings are to be held in South Africa and Sri Lanka in 1996 and 1997, respectively.

118. ESCAP has formulated a project proposal entitled "Prospects of enhancing cooperation in trade and investment amongst countries bordering the Bay of Bengal", and ECA might consider undertaking a similar project involving its concerned member countries.

4. Strengthening technical cooperation among developing countries

119. ESCAP and ECA could jointly formulate a project with a special focus on technical cooperation among developing countries and pursue the possibility of UNDP funding, as a follow-up to the Asia-Africa forum held in Bandung, Indonesia (12-16 December 1994). The forum adopted the Bandung Framework for Asia/Africa Cooperation, which made a series of recommendations for enhancing cooperation between the two regions in such areas as human resources development, food and agriculture, trade and investment, private sector development, macroeconomic management, and development cooperation including strengthening of arrangements for economic/technical cooperation. The meeting was co-organized by the Governments of Japan and Indonesia, the United Nations Secretariat, UNDP and Global Coalitions for Africa, and many participants at the meeting stressed the need to involve, inter alia, ESCAP and ECA in the follow-up.

5. Investment flows

120. There is mounting evidence that foreign direct investment drives trade. Thus, a major challenge for the regional commissions is to design measures or programmes that promote investment flows among the five regions. For example, investment round tables could be organized to bring together business people with investment resources. ECA is organizing in June 1996 an international Conference on Reviving Private Investment in Africa which will bring business people from North America, Europe and East Asia to meet with African senior policy makers and business people. It is possible to envisage a follow-up project in which an investment and trade network, centred around regional or subregional chambers of commerce and industry, could be developed. The regional commissions, in cooperation with UNCTAD, could play an important facilitating role in this respect by linking relevant business institutions.

III. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARIES ON REFORM

121. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 1823 (XVII) and Economic and Social Council resolution 1817 (LV), the executive secretaries met in Geneva on 4 July 1995, in conjunction with the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council, and in New York on 15-16 February 1996. The 1995 meeting was chaired by the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe, and the 1996 meeting was chaired by the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, each in his/her capacity as coordinator of the regional commissions at the time of the meeting.

122. In both meetings the executive secretaries, in addition to reviewing the substance and modalities of the coordination and cooperation arrangements among the regional commissions and with relevant bodies and funds, exchanged views on the reform and restructuring of their respective organizations in the context of ongoing reform and restructuring of the United Nations, changing needs and priorities of the regions as they prepare for transition into the twenty-first century, ongoing relevant initiatives of the respective organizations to render more cost-effective and demand-driven services on the basis of their comparative advantages, and avoidance of duplication with other relevant bodies and institutions within the United Nations system.

123. The executive secretaries were of the view that the review exercise should reflect a holistic approach to development, so that economic development, social development and environmental protection can become interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development. The review exercise should also reflect the overall context of the ongoing reform and restructuring in the economic and social sectors under guidance of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly. The growing interdependence in the economic, social and environmental fields means that an increasing number of issues cannot be effectively addressed by countries individually and that, owing to increasing globalization and the progress in technologies for information flows, transport and trade, many development problems require more of a regional approach. Furthermore, many of the issues in the economic and social fields calling for concerted international action have both regional and global dimensions.

124. The executive secretaries of the regional commissions and the then-acting Secretary-General of UNCTAD, in consultation with the Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Administration and Management of the United Nations Secretariat, decided to commission an independent review of the programmes of work of UNCTAD and of the regional commissions, with special emphasis on areas of possible rationalization.

125. It is pertinent to note that the multidisciplinary character of the regional commissions imposes certain minimum requirements if the commissions are to have a "critical mass" on each of the issues that are deemed especially relevant to the development of their developing membership. The commissions have gone through a prolonged adjustment process over the past five years which, for practical purposes, meant substantial downsizing, partially reflecting the 1989 reduction in posts funded through the United Nations regular budget, and fundamental changes in the long-established relationship between them and two United Nations funding bodies - UNDP and UNFPA. The drastic reduction in the

funding support by those bodies for priority operational activities of the commissions, beginning in 1990, made it necessary to dismiss - or, in some cases, absorb - a very substantial number of staff - up to a quarter of all staff in some cases - with all of the adjustments and decreases in output entailed.

126. The brief account provided below of the ongoing reform and restructuring exercises of the regional commissions is based on relevant documents and papers prepared by the secretariats of the commissions for review by their respective legislative bodies.

A. Economic Commission for Europe

127. Between 1990 and 1995, ECE membership increased from 34 to 55 countries, with a corresponding increase in the demands on ECE associated with the economic reform of countries in transition. In order to respond to the new situation and the changing needs of its member countries, the Commission adopted, as a first step, at its forty-fifth session in 1990, decision O(45), which streamlined the intergovernmental structure and process and assigned priority to five areas of activity: environment, transport, trade facilitation, statistics and economic analysis. Responding to the decision, and as reflected in the programme budget, staff were subsequently redeployed to high priority sectors.

128. ECE continues tc adapt to take into account the evolving needs of its members, the realities imposed by scarce resources and the existence of various other international institutions with whom it must cooperate. It is to be noted that all subsidiary bodies define their programme of work on an annual basis. Activities that were initiated with the adoption of the decision have continued, with the result that the proceedings of the plenary sessions of both the Commission and some of its principal subsidiary bodies have become increasingly efficient. In addition, following the example of the Conference of European Statisticians, a principal subsidiary body of the Commission, a consistent effort is being made to increase the responsibility of the Bureau of the Commission. At the same time, some of the results of a strategic planning exercise initiated by the secretariat have been implemented, including a review of ECE's statistical publications, which led to the cancellation of 10 publications.

129. Most recently, at its special session of 20 September 1995, the Commission adopted decision 1 (1995-S) by which it decided to establish an ad hoc working group which would, inter alia, define the strategic directions of future activities of the Commission, taking into account budget capacity and possible recommendations of the ECE ad hoc meeting on savings and the needs and priorities of the countries in transition.

130. As part of the review process, the ad hoc working group distributed a questionnaire to the Bureaux of all ECE principal subsidiary bodies and related bodies reporting directly to the Commission and to ECE Governments on their views about the Commission's programme of work. Replies to the questionnaires were to be utilized by the working group to evaluate the work and performance of the Commission and to suggest appropriate action in respect of the priorities of

the Commission and its programme of work. The group presented an interim report on its work to the fifty-first session of the Commission in April 1996. That session adopted a resolution on the subject which, inter alia, requested the working group to finalize its deliberations as soon as possible in order to prepare a declaration on strengthening of economic cooperation in Europe, to be adopted by the Commission at its fifty-second (Jubilee) session in 1997.

B. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

131. ECAFE/ESCAP has carried out major reform/restructuring exercises at intervals of about 10 years. However, the search for more relevant programme objectives and a more suitable organizational structure became more urgent in the 1980s. The objective was obvious: to remain relevant and effective in order to support the development needs and aspirations of the developing countries of the region in a fast changing world.

132. At its forty-third session in 1987, in response to General Assembly resolution 41/213 of 19 December 1986, on review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations, and Economic and Social Council decision 1987/112 of 6 February 1987, on an in-depth study of the United Nations intergovernmental structure and functions in the economic and social fields, the Commission reduced the number of its legislative committees from nine to seven.

133. At its forty-seventh session in 1991, the Commission generally endorsed the recommendation of a group of eminent persons that the work of the Commission be organized on the basis of a thematic approach. After due deliberation, at its forty-eighth session, the Commission adopted resolution 48/2 in which it, inter alia, established a subsidiary structure consisting of three thematic committees (on regional economic cooperation, environment and sustainable development, and poverty alleviation through economic growth and social development), two other committees (on statistics, and transport and communications), and two special bodies (on least developed and land-locked developing countries, and Pacific island developing countries). It also established an advisory committee of permanent representatives and other representatives designated by members of the Commission. It decided to reduce its subprogrammes to six corresponding subprogrammes, including one for the two special bodies. It invited the Executive Secretary, under direction of the Secretary-General, to reorganize the secretariat so as to enhance its capability to service the new thematic structure, and decided to review the conference structure of the Commission, including its thematic priorities and its subsidiary structure no later than at its fifty-third session (March/April 1997).

134. In January 1996 the Executive Secretary initiated an in-house review process by establishing a secretariat working group on ESCAP reform, with the objectives of achieving better focus of the work of ESCAP, on the basis of the comparative advantage of ESCAP, improved functioning of ESCAP, in meeting the priority needs of the region efficiently and effectively, and enhancement of the image of ESCAP, in particular, recognition of its contribution and its role in the region. The working group is carrying out studies that should lead to a

background document for consideration by a group of eminent persons in October 1996, with a view to facilitating the consideration of the subject by the Commission at its fifty-third session, in 1997.

135. At its fifty-second session, the Commission was acutely aware of the need for undertaking an in-depth review of the orientation of ESCAP's work, its structure and the substantive contents of its programmes. The deliberations of the Commission on the subject generally stressed the catalytic role of ESCAP in providing support to various national development activities and in promoting regional economic cooperation for development. It recognized that further streamlining and more focusing of its activities were needed to improve its effectiveness and efficiency.

136. In resolution 52/1 of 24 April 1996, on preparation for the review of the conference structure of the Commission, the Commission, inter alia, acknowledged that the review exercise offered a valuable opportunity to reassess its orientation of work and output against the needs and priorities of the region, while keeping in view the comparative advantage of the Commission. The resolution welcomed the preparations initiated by the Executive Secretary on the subject, requested him to consult the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives, and requested the latter also to undertake an independent review of the conference structure of the Commission, which would take into account the progress made in the preparatory exercise initiated by the Executive Secretary. The Executive Secretary was requested to convene a regional preparatory meeting in Bangkok by February 1997 to discuss, among other things, the outcome of the secretariat's preparatory exercise and the Advisory Committee's recommendations, and to submit its report to the Commission at its fifty-third session. The Commission's review in 1997 would also be in a position to take into account the deliberations of a symposium, "Development challenges and opportunities for Asia and the Pacific in the twenty-first century and the role of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific", which the Government of China will organize in Shanghai in early 1997 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of ESCAP.

C. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

137. The change of context in Latin America and the Caribbean in the past 50 years has been impressive. Tangible proof is seen in the region's economic, social and demographic indicators, the way in which each country relates to its external environment, and the interaction between the various agents within each society. The period has seen the rise of numerous institutions - national (governmental, academic and private), subregional and regional - which engage in analytical and operational activities similar to those of ECLAC. In addition, there have been major changes in the conceptual framework relating to development and the specific issues of how it should be approached. A question might arise, therefore, as to whether the motives that prompted Governments to establish ECLAC in February 1949 remain valid or whether an adaptation to present and future needs is required. It should be noted that the concern over maintaining the Commission's relevance has two main threads: first, the need to adapt the functioning of the United Nations to current global demands, and

secondly, the need to adapt the functioning of regional and subregional intergovernmental institutions to current and future regional demands.

138. An ongoing concern of ECLAC is to remain relevant to its member Governments and constituency. Thus, at ECLAC, reform is not a passing fad but a continuous process of adapting to new circumstances. This process is reflected in three distinct categories: the changing content and scope of the work programme; the evolving manner in which ECLAC interacts with its member Governments; and changes in organization, management styles and even attitudes or the work ethic in order to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. A fourth category could be added - namely, the relationship between ECLAC and the rest of the United Nations.

139. As to the first category, ECLAC is recognized in Latin America for its seminal contributions to development economics. In more recent times, as circumstances in the region and its external environment have changed, the Commission has updated and expanded its message. Not only has it formulated a framework proposal for the 1990s and beyond, but special efforts have been made to forge institutional opinions on leading emerging issues, such as debt and adjustment in the 1980s and sustainable development and globalization in the 1990s. Thus, the Commission has fulfilled its role as a sounding board for promoting debate on these issues, which has been vital to its remaining relevant.

140. As to the relationship between ECLAC and its member Governments, an effort has been made to interact on a continual basis with technicians and authorities at the national level, to receive comments from them and to transmit to them the Commission's institutional opinions. This interaction takes place among a wide array of national actors (ministries of finance, economics, trade, environment and planning) and is not limited to the public sector. The Commission especially values its relationship with the academic community. In addition, missions to countries (and the presence of offices in some of the larger ones), the holding of seminars and meetings of governmental experts and visits by senior public officials to ECLAC headquarters all play an important role.

141. In the third category, organizational and management issues, while no doubt very important, are significant only in the context of the other two categories, i.e., the substantive functions of the Commission. ECLAC has made major efforts over the past five years to develop a more efficient and effective secretariat through more streamlined organization, cost-saving measures, rigorous programming, training, improving horizontal and vertical communication between staff, and enhancing responsibility and accountability on the part of individual staff members and organizational units.

142. It is seeking to make optimum use of the resources placed at its disposal and to implement its work programme in accordance with exacting standards of efficiency and effectiveness. This effort to update its activities and methods has been carried out in consultation with member Governments, especially within the framework of the Commission's biennial meetings.

143. At its twenty-sixth session, held in April 1996, ECLAC adopted resolution 553 (XXVI), on reform of the United Nations and its impact on ECLAC, in which

the Commission stressed that it is especially well endowed to undertake, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the activities entrusted to it by the Economic and Social Council in the framework of a restructured United Nations. Moreover, ECLAC reiterates its mission to functioning as a centre of excellence, collaborating with Governments in the integral analysis of development processes geared at the formulation, follow-up and evaluation of public policies and providing operative services in the fields of specialized information, advice, training and support to regional cooperation. It proposes measures to improve its performance, impact, efficiency and effectiveness and establishes a special intergovernmental open committee, with the mandate to set up the priorities in the working programme of 1998-1999 and to propose guidelines on future activities and budgetary matters. The group will also prepare a progress report which will be presented to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for their consideration.

D. Economic Commission for Africa

144. Established by the Economic and Social Council in 1958, ECA is mandated to build African institutions, articulate plans and strategies, advocate policies and provide technical cooperation. It has had several major successes: setting up the African Development Bank (ADB), helping to found subregional economic groupings such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Preferential Trade Area (PTA), and articulating major plans of action.

145. However, ECA needs to reorganize and reform, in response to changes in Africa, to a series of critical studies about its own operations, and - as part of the broader United Nations reform process - to be more cost-effective and to play a more central part than ever in initiatives for African development.

146. So ECA has gone through months of intense self-reflection, expert studies, and consultation with the Bureau of the Conference of Ministers and a group of leading ministers, academic non-governmental organizations and private-sector leaders. Its plans for reorganizing and sharpening its focus, strengthening partnerships and increasing its impact are elaborated in the report "Serving Africa better: strategic directions for the Economic Commission for Africa", which was submitted to the recent ECA Conference of Ministers (Addis Ababa, 6-8 May 1996), as the high point of its renewal process. As indicated in the report, the strategic focusing and prioritizing of ECA's agenda is based on clear priorities and on its comparative advantages: its regional focus, its commitment as an organization in and of Africa; its role in analysing regional issues, fostering regional cooperation, identifying role models, comparing and harmonizing policies, compiling and networking development information and data. The organizational structure of ECA is being reorganized so as to be more consistent with the above programme areas. The restructuring of the administration of ECA has already been carried out.

147. Among policy priorities for ECA, reducing poverty is the overarching goal. Successful strategies call for promoting labour-demanding growth, investing in education and health, and providing safety nets for the poor. Good governance is important for giving space to the private sector as an engine of economic growth and to civil society as a force for popular participation and democracy.

Empowering women socially and economically, through education, legal rights, access to credit and by strengthening the informal sector, is the most direct way to invigorate African communities, where women are key producers and distributors and where the feminization of poverty is a symbol and a cause of the African development malaise.

148. Another policy priority is overcoming structural problems, such as distorted macroeconomies, inadequate capital markets, poor infrastructure, low skills base, and regulations that discourage investment. The right policies and investments to promote regional economic cooperation are crucial to Africa's economic growth, to free the movement of goods, services, capital and people. Most urgent are policies coordinated to deal with the dangerous triangle of growing population, diminishing food production and degraded environment.

149. The consolidating and refocusing of programmes of ECA were found to be essential. From nine programmes in 21 different areas, ECA proposed to concentrate on five core themes and two cross-cutting themes. The choice of themes responds to mandates of ECA and was guided by an initiative of the OAU Council of Ministers in March 1995, entitled "Relaunching Africa's economic and social development: the Cairo Agenda for Action", which was adopted by the June 1995 Summit of African Heads of States and Governments. It is the most recent policy document to identify ECA's priorities and reaffirm Africa's primary responsibility for its own development.

150. The five programme directions on which ECA's work will focus over the next six years are: facilitating economic and social policy analysis and implementation, whereby the Commission will sharpen its focus to give added emphasis to remedies for poverty and to highlighting best practices in Africa's economic and social policies; ensuring food security and sustainable development, where foundations of food security, population and environment will be the focus; strengthening development management, so as to continue key work on fostering effective public sectors, the private sector and civil society; harnessing information for development, for the expansion of work that could help Africa leapfrog years of effort; and promoting regional cooperation, to work on the Abuja Treaty in carrying out shared responsibilities with OAU and ADB, to help subregional organizations, and to carry out responsibilities in transport and energy.

151. The two themes cutting across all five new programme areas are gender-enhancing women's participation in economic development- and capacity-building. Gender will be mainstreamed in all ECA's in-house activities and in all its programme work, recognizing women as a major force for sustainable development, with renewed mandates, globally from the Beijing Platform for Action, and regionally from the Kampala Action Plan. On the second theme, ECA's new Framework Agenda for Building and Utilizing Critical Capacities in Africa will be a reference for coordinating United Nations activities in this area, which has been a major missing link in Africa's development.

152. Exploiting its comparative advantage, ECA will act as a think tank on socio-economic development and a clearing-house for best practices, with a focus on longer-term growth and sustainability issues. At the same time, ECA will set up advisory services to provide support to member States in formulating their

short- and medium-term programmes, in the context of strengthening African Governments' positions in dialogue with the Bretton Woods institutions, IMF and the World Bank. In cooperation with United Nations resident coordinators, ECA will seek ways to bolster African Governments' capabilities in presentations to round tables and consultative group meetings, in debt-rescheduling exercises and, in general, in formulating economic reform programmes and country strategy notes.

153. ECA, like the other regional commissions, is not a funding agency but rather helps to spread development ideas. Its two modalities are advocacy and technical assistance. Its main vehicles for delivery will continue to be strategic policy documents, meetings of its policy-making organs, special conferences and published material.

154. At the same time, existing modalities will be reformed and streamlined in seven ways: reduced meetings; fewer and improved reports and revitalized publications; new networking arrangements; increased interactions with member States; more effective technical support, including use of country representatives; enhanced South-South cooperation; and strategic alliances with partners.

155. ECA will pay particular attention to fostering lasting and fruitful partnerships. The search for long-term partners connotes a shift in strategy in which ECA is less the self-contained producer of work and far more the networker helping to put forward the best possible thinking. But ECA will not surrender its vision of what is best for Africa when entering partnerships with other influential multilateral development institutions. The main goal of strengthening cooperation in those ways is to respond better to the need of ECA's main clients, the Governments and people of Africa.

156. In its resolution 809 (XXXI), entitled "New directions for the Economic Commission for Africa", the 1996 Conference of Ministers expressed appreciation for the process of reform and renewal of the Commission and endorsed its new orientation. The Conference emphasized that a renewed ECA would serve as a credible and active voice and a facilitator in Africa's development. It also requested the Executive Secretary, in close collaboration with the Bureau of the Commission, to revise the 1996-1997 work programme to reflect the new orientation of the Commission's work and to ensure a smooth transition in 1997 to the next medium-term plan.

E. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

157. Ever since its establishment in 1974, ESCWA has had to cope with several upheavals and wars in the region, forcing it to change headquarters a number of times and throwing it into uncertainty in the process. Only in the past few years has it found enough "breathing time" to consolidate itself as an institution and review conference, programme and secretariat structure, notwithstanding its temporary location.

158. ESCWA contends that reform is a continuing process, aiming at improvement and change. The main objectives of its reform are a more cost-effective

secretariat; increased participation and involvement of member States in ESCWA's work; a concentration of work programmes on action-oriented activities based on its comparative advantage through which ESCWA can make an impact on the region.

159. In order to respond to the development needs and aspirations of the region as a forum and a catalyst for development, ESCWA's reforms were undertaken to cover its organizational set-up and functions, its links to member States; and its place and role in the United Nations system.

160. As regards its restructuring exercise, ESCWA had two concrete results in 1994: a new legislative and programme structure, and a thematic/ interdisciplinary approach to work programme planning, coordination and implementation. In fact, the final outcome of the restructuring was a streamlining of ESCWA activities, which entailed moving from a sectoral programming approach with 15 subprogrammes to five thematic subprogrammes. Within the same framework, the secretariat set up five substantive divisions to implement the five subprogrammes. These reforms have been translated into priority actions within the proposed 1996-1997 work programme, adopted by ESCWA in May 1995, and the medium-term plan for 1998-2001.

161. As a result of the new approach to its relationship with its member States, ESCWA now has four specialized subsidiary intergovernmental committees. The Statistics Committee, established by ESCWA resolution 179 (XVI) of 2 September 1992, had its first meeting in November 1995 and will meet biennially thereafter; the Committee on Social Development, established by resolution 198 (XVII) of 31 May 1994, is scheduled to meet biennially starting in 1997; the Committee on Energy, established by resolution 204 (XVIII) of 25 May 1995, is scheduled to meet biennially starting in 1997; and the Committee on Water Resources, established by resolution 205 (XVIII) of 25 May 1995, is scheduled to meet biennially starting in 1997.

162. The four committees assist the Commission in formulating its work programme in their respective areas and report to the Technical Committee, which meets biennially, in conjunction with the sessions of the Commission. As in the other regional commissions, the Ministerial Session of ESCWA is the governing body of the Commission.

163. In terms of the ESCWA secretariat's links with member States, the most important changes and improvements were the establishment of specialized subsidiary intergovernmental bodies and the reactivation of the Consultative Committee. The process of dialogue with the members of the Commission is mainly carried out through the Consultative Committee of Permanent Representatives on a regular basis.

164. That Committee, established in 1989, consists of heads of diplomatic missions in the host country of the Commission plus a representative of the host country. It serves in a consultative capacity and is an important point of interaction between member States and between them and the ESCWA secretariat on important issues and events that occur between the biennial sessions of the Commission. Its mandate was amended at the eighteenth session in May 1995 to expand the membership so as to ensure the participation of high-level officials

from the host country. Its regular meetings contribute to ESCWA's work in a decisive manner.

165. The inter-agency coordination efforts of ESCWA are being channelled through the establishment and functioning of the Regional Inter-agency Coordinating Group, comprised of representatives of United Nations regional offices. This mechanism was established in April 1995, to support closer coordination among the institutions of the United Nations system and to respond to requests made by the member States. Its principal aim is to strengthen coordination at the regional level and to identify modalities for that purpose. So far, the Group has met three times in Amman: an informal meeting in April 1995, and two formal meetings in October 1995 and January 1996. The Group has agreed to share information about the United Nations; identify common action to be taken to assist the United Nations during this period of financial crisis; and identify possible areas for joint activities. The Group has established a task force on gender issues and has agreed to establish other task forces on specific issues, as required.

166. ESCWA considers that its reforms are part of the overall United Nations reforms. Their implementation and success will therefore depend on the relevance and usefulness of the United Nations reform as a whole. What has been achieved so far by ESCWA constitutes only a preliminary phase which will continue with further specific ESCWA reform actions within the United Nations system. In a rapidly changing global and regional environment, ESCWA will continue to meet challenges through its reform process which also includes a reaffirmation of ESCWA's identity, improvement of its image and a new, stronger ESCWA management culture, in the context of the new development opportunities offered by the peace process.

F. Conclusions

167. Reform of the regional commissions cannot take place in a vacuum; it must be part of the broader mission entrusted to the United Nations in the economic and social spheres. In the final analysis, a decision on the question rests with member States. In his report on an agenda for development (A/49/665), the Secretary-General recommends that the United Nations concentrate its development activities in four major areas in which it appears to have comparative advantages:

(a) Fostering conceptual and practical ways of coordinating the various dimensions of development (peace, economic growth, environment, social justice and democracy);

(b) Helping to raise public awareness of emerging transnational issues (as was done in the recent past for such issues as poverty, the environment, population and integrating women into the development process) as a prerequisite for any concerted action;

(c) Promoting international cooperation and taking steps to ensure that regionalism and multilateralism are mutually complementary and compatible;

(d) Providing those non-conditional technical services that no other organization is able to provide, especially in the area of institution-building at the national level.

168. Once the mission of the United Nations in the economic and social fields has been clarified, it remains to be determined how functions should be distributed ("who does what") within the Secretariat and between the Secretariat and the rest of the system. The first question implies the need to decide which activities should be carried out at United Nations Headquarters and which in the field - i.e., at the regional or national level. This uncertainty over the degree of centralization of management and operations arises in all transnational organizations and enterprises, and there is a growing consensus as to the advantages of decentralizing activities on the basis of specific guidelines and policies emanating from the centre.

169. It is essential to incorporate regional considerations into the analysis of global problems, and vice versa, a task for which the United Nations is uniquely qualified. Moreover, one of the Organization's ongoing tasks should be specifically to harmonize regional and international cooperation. This means that activities which by their very nature have always been carried out by the regional commissions as a contribution to the strengthening of regionalism may continue to be important in the future - i.e., technical cooperation among developing countries; providing technical services to the secretariats of regional and subregional integration mechanisms; promoting cooperation in numerous fields which lend themselves to bilateral and multilateral collaboration (facilitating trade, transport and common standards, stimulating scientific research and technological development, using energy sources efficiently and protecting the environment, among many others); and playing a coordinating role by raising issues of regional interest in global forums and global issues in regional forums.

170. It is clear that the regional commissions are well placed to carry out efficiently the tasks and functions referred to above because of their proximity to the field, their multidisciplinary character and their close interaction with their member Governments. Furthermore, certain functions, such as providing technical assistance, compiling information and maintaining contact with governmental authorities, are simply easier and less expensive to perform on a decentralized basis. As a consequence, it is essential that appropriate arrangements be set up to utilize more effectively the capacities and potentials of the regional commissions in order to enhance the contributions of the United Nations as a whole in the service of member countries. The follow-up to global conferences provides an example of such arrangements.